

*Even Hollywood knows little about this million-dollar mystery man—is he a heavy drinker who's unhappily married or a solid family man? A "Golden Boy" or a tarnished idol? For the first time, here are the no-punches-pulled answers*



Bill Holden leaped to glory in his first role, "Golden Boy" (left). But afterward there were nothing but "nice-boy" parts. A second big chance came in 1953 when he

costarred with Gloria Swanson in "Sunset Boulevard" (center). After that, Holden had his pick of choice and varied roles, such as in "The Horse Soldiers" (right).

When we met for tea the following afternoon, he referred to the previous evening. "You probably saw how hard I worked to relax last night," he observed. "It's like that everywhere I go. Comes from living out of suitcases. How happy I'd be to wake up in my own bed in Switzerland tomorrow! Some day . . ."

At one time drinking also seemed to be a means of drowning disgust with his career. After a spectacular role in "Golden Boy" in 1938, he won only mediocre parts until 1953 when "Sunset Boulevard" saved him from oblivion.

Being a "nice guy," Bill was never able to "blow off steam." Instead, he took his frustrations out on himself, and the prolonged era of run-of-the-mill films was especially hard because he had made such a promising start.

#### **Early Career in Slow-motion**

Bill was in the sixth grade when he first became interested in acting, after playing Rip Van Winkle in a school play. There seemed little opportunity for the stage or screen, though. His father took for granted that Bill and his two brothers would follow him into the chemical fertilizer business—a fate that Bill didn't relish in spite of a great respect for his dad.

He probably would have joined his father if fate hadn't intervened when he was 20 and a second-year student at South Pasadena Junior College. A producer who had heard Bill sing in a church choir and liked his voice offered him the part of an 80-year-old man in a Pasadena Play-

house play. Bill accepted and did so well that talent scout Milt Lewis arranged a screen test for him at Paramount.

No one at the studio got wildly enthusiastic about the results, but Bill was signed to a \$50-a-week contract, had his name changed from Beedle to Holden, and was sent to Columbia to test for the lead in "Golden Boy."

At this point, Holden gives two people credit for his big break—the late Columbia studio boss, Harry Cohn, and the star of the film, actress Barbara Stanwyck.

When he was ushered into Mr. Cohn's office for his "Golden Boy" interview, Cohn asked him if he played the violin, as called for in the role.

"No, sir," said Holden.

Cohn asked, "Can you box?" After all, Golden Boy was a fighter, too.

Bill shook his head.

"Can you act?"

"I don't think so," Bill replied.

"Then why did you come here?" Cohn exploded.

"Because you sent for me," Bill said.

"In that case," Cohn sighed, "we better make a test to find out why I did that."

That's how Bill got his chance.

With seemingly no qualifications to play Golden Boy, Bill became extremely nervous during his first days on the set. To conceal his fear, he gave director Rouben Mamoulian amateurish advice on how the film should be done. That would have gotten him fired if it hadn't been for Barbara Stanwyck's interference on his behalf. Moreover, to

help him, she began giving him private rehearsals for the next day's scenes.

"She pulled me through," Bill says.

The film made him a star overnight—and led nowhere.

Bill was only 21 and, at that time, there were few parts for fellows his age. Also, he was modest and unspectacular. He never did anything to make headlines, and he was quickly forgotten in what he refers to as a "long series of nothing roles."

Four years in the Army interrupted his career. When he returned, the studio gateman no longer recognized him and wouldn't even let him in.

Executives weren't much more impressed. It took them seven months before they put Bill into his first film—more "Smiling Jim" parts, as he calls his "nothing" roles.

#### **"Sunrise" on "Sunset Boulevard"**

By 1953, 15 years after becoming an "overnight hit," Bill was still just another second lead on Paramount's long roster of stars. And it wasn't his ability that finally gave Bill a fresh start but Montgomery Clift's unwillingness to play a part especially written for him in "Sunset Boulevard." With no other suitable actor available, Holden got his chance to play Joe Gillis, the opportunistic, penniless young writer.

As director Billy Wilder puts it, "If Clift hadn't turned down the role, Holden wouldn't have gotten to work with me. If he hadn't gotten to work with me, he wouldn't have been cast as a scrounging chiseler in my film, 'Stalag 17.' No Holden in

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